

The Body of Romance: Citation and Mourning in *Written on the Body*

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The highly codified expectations of the romance genre, the discursive limits of interpellations of the body, as well as, the role of our citational legacy in the formation of embodied subjectivity, engage Winterson in Written on the Body. By means of a highly theatrical performance that relies heavily on a deliberately excessive use of citation for its effect, Winterson's novel renders visible the role of language and narrative in the construction of the desiring body. Freudian and Lacanian understandings of the relationship between the desiring body and loss can assist our understanding of the ways in which the desiring body is constituted in a melancholic narrative; this, in turn, enables a recognition of the necessity to repeat, and the possibilities inherent in the compulsive repetition. Winterson's narrative cannot fail but to repeat, but in doing so, it also enacts a breakdown through its inscription of melancholic excess--an excess which returns a difference. Hence, While Written on the Body installs a received and, hence, citational thematic of seduction and loss, both the narrator and the text wish to escape the seductions of this legacy. Winterson's novel provides a moment of breakdown, a glimpse of a limited recovery, by revealing that the real melancholia inscribed in narrative is not the romantic compulsion to repeat but that occasioned by our desire to narrate 'the same story every time.' In Written on the Body, Winterson returns a repetition with a difference and thereby signals provisional possibilities in the ongoing construction of the body of desire.

*The red plague rid you for learning me your language*ⁱ

Jeanette Winterson's 1992 novel, *Written on the Body*, opens with the words, "Why is the measure of love loss?" thus signaling a romance narrative. Moreover, within a few lines, we read that "Love demands expression"(9). These two statements, so closely placed upon the page, lead me to believe that perhaps, in fact, it is loss that demands expression; it is loss that must be told. Some critics, such as David Lodge and Christy Burns (Lodge 25-6; Burns "Fantastic Language" *passim*) have remarked the salient romanticism in Winterson's novel. Lodge warns that while romance "deals with the unfamiliar, transgresses known limits, and transports the reader into new imaginative territory, [t]here is a certain stylistic price to be paid for this adventurousness, and a certain danger to be faced" (Lodge 26). Lodge's comments must be given due consideration as *stylistic danger* (purposefully conflating his two concerns), is Winterson's explicit interest in *Written on the Body*. This romanticism, as Lodge and Burns see it, constellates around the thematic investments of the novel--primarily, the seduction of the narrator and of his/her object of desire, Louise. In her later, 1994 text, *Art and Lies*, Winterson, as the title suggests, draws our attention to the history of art as an ongoing compulsive repetition embedded in the language and representations of desire; here, she speaks of "[t]he seducing word"ⁱⁱ. While *Written on the Body* does, indeed, incorporate the thematic of seduction, it is my contention that the novel actually subverts the romantic investments of and in the novel, by invoking and then refusing both reader identification and the poetics of seduction. While the narrator protagonist of this novel mourns the loss of his/her love, the narrative, itself, appears to mourn other losses: the loss of the other that language tries ever and unsuccessfully to replace; the loss of the illusion of a coherent non-discursive subjectivity. Whether we interpret the loss as the Lacanian object or as the 'loss'ⁱⁱⁱ of a non-discursive reality, in Winterson's text the mourning produced by this loss is the result of the failure of language (of the symbolic) to inscribe and construct a trajectory outside the logic of romantic seduction. At the same time, this mourning is the incitement

to narrate--the cause of narrative desire. The narrative reiteration that attempts to “reverse or suspend time” (Butler *Psychic* 174) is the gesture of the melancholic, however. Mourning, Freud tells us, passes over into melancholia when the love object is not replaced by another, when the subject does not effect a shift in libidinal investment and turns the love (and hate) once directed at the object of desire back upon the self. Narrative, then, may function as the way in which melancholia holds the lost object of desire ever before us. *Written on the Body* clearly addresses the nature of the desiring subject as a product of narrative--that is, of a melancholia that is continually inscribed on the body.

Leslie Rabine argues that the romance plot undermines even the possibility of an autonomous feminine and Rachel M. Brownstein concurs. For Brownstein, even when the questing protagonist is female, she acts only as a metaphor and mirror for the masculine integrated self. According to these critics, death and/or marriage (a ‘death’ of the autonomous female self) are the inevitable outcomes of the romance plot (eg. *Jane Eyre*). Significantly, Winterson’s novel, *Written on the Body*, with its poetic love story, which details the separation and, arguably, the reunion of two lovers, certainly, at one level, reproduces this conventional plot. However, as Hillis Miller has argued in *Reading Narrative*, narrative serves both the function of reproducing cultural norms, sustaining the *status quo*, while, at the same time, it may question hegemonic ideologies and the ways in which these ideologies are inscribed on the body by linguistic means:

Each story and each repetition or variation of it leaves some uncertainty or contains some loose ends unraveling its effect, according to an implacable law that is not so much psychological or social as linguistic. This necessary incompleteness means that no story fulfills perfectly, once and for all, its functions of ordering and confirming. (72)

Therefore, while narratives of romantic seduction reproduce and, thereby, construct normative bodies, they may well, at the same time, contain the seeds of their own contestation. Hence, while *Written on the Body* does install a rather conventional thematic of seduction and loss, Winterson’s unnamed, ambiguously gendered, narrator also questions the seductions of romance, both as a structural function (the subject of romance) and, more directly, as the speaking persona. In fact, Winterson’s narrator laments that genre reproduces “the same story every time” (13); both the narrator and the text wish to escape what Butler calls the “citational legacy” (Butler, *Bodies* 225). As Catherine Belsey points out, in different terms, this citational legacy haunts us as we speak: “Lovers speak, and yet in doing so they are spoken by a language that precedes them, that is not at their disposal, under their control: this language is at the same time dispersed among banalities, poetry, the sacred, tragedy” (84). Language speaks us. Indeed, the signature trope of the text can be read in the following lines: “Written on the body is a secret code only visible in certain lights; the accumulations of a lifetime gather there. In places the palimpsest is so heavily worked that the letters feel like braille” (89). The skill resides, then, in our “reading hands” (89)--in being able to read the heavily inscribed body, and, indeed, the body of literature, as it were, in order to lay bare the assumptions therein. While superficially Winterson employs conventional romance tropes, her narrative strategies provoke questions regarding the normative ideologies inscribed on the body, particularly on the body which is interpellated by such a deadly plot; they also

address the failure of the symbolic to offer alternatives to these deadly bodies and sadistic plots^{iv}. It is this failure of romance that occasions the narration in the novel, and it is the compulsion for romance that produces the excesses of melancholia.

This self-reflexivity is a salient feature of the novel, as in lines such as “[t]his is the wrong script” (18) and “I can tell by now that you are wondering whether I can be trusted as a narrator” (24). Statements such as these draw our attention, not only to the rather conventional device of the unreliable narrator, but also to the construction of narrative truth as an effect of language, artifice and generic precedents, and also to the reader’s participation in the maintenance of these precedents through acts of identification, or refusal. That is, our incredulity is invoked and mocked at the same time, as the narrator directs an interpellation to us: he/she can *tell* that our patience is being tried. Winterson’s narrator also inscribes an excess of dead metaphors and explains that “It is the clichés that cause the trouble”: “Love makes the world go round. Love is blind. All you need is love. Nobody ever died of a broken heart. You’ll get over it” (10). This reflexivity is further underscored by an abundance of intertextual echoes in this novel--Shakespeare, Petrarch, Keats, Donne, Bogart and Bacall, to name a few--which demonstrate the citationality of literature and thus mark the very limits of language, and the limits of genre. These intertexts, like reader identification, invoke a sense of familiarity by installing predictable literary precedents, such as Donne’s trope of the room which is made an everywhere by love^v. These literary and generic precedents are installed and undermined precisely by means of this reflexive structure, which *mourns* the citationality of literature and language and the same time as it installs the citational repetition to excess. “Why do I collude in this mis-use of language” (57) is the plaint of the ostensible author^{vi}; that is, why to we collude in the same story every time.

Despite this reflexivity and the abundance of ironic intertextual echoes, Winterson’s novel has been accused of “unabashed romanticism” (Reed-Morrison 101). Sarah Schulman remarks that the “plot hovers dangerously on the precipice of device” (20) and Barbara Hoffert condemns the novel as “minimal and not altogether original” (195). In fact, Laura Reed-Morrison calls the novel a “surprisingly traditional” and “classic tale” (101); however, she does admit that Winterson’s novel “employs the love story . . . to explore the relationship between language, knowledge and the body” (102). Paulina Palmer also notes that Winterson’s style in this novel is “more obviously derivative” (112) than is her other work. Interestingly, this perception, that the novel is a classic--that is, heteronormative--derivative, and, hence, a somewhat banal romance, may have contributed to the mixed reception of the novel. Marilyn Farwell tells us that Winterson’s novel raised considerable controversy amongst the judges of the 1993 Lambda Award for Lesbian fiction, as they could not agree on whether the novel was or was not lesbian. Is it sufficient that the novel was written by a self-proclaimed lesbian, they asked, because the narrative refused to identify the gender of the protagonist and, some argued, thereby refused a lesbian identification and politic. What is interesting in context of this debate is the fact that this novel undermines these very identity categories and the failure of these critics to acknowledge this marks a lacuna in some feminist criticism--an apparent incapacity to recognize the contestatory power of the decidedly queer politic that informs Winterson’s fiction. Interestingly, such a failure to see, what Foucault has called, “the other of what was said,” is reminiscent of earlier lapses in

feminist vision, such as the failure to remark the intersections of issues of race, class, and ethnicity, with those of gender. Here, in Winterson, we see emerging a critique of certain strains of feminist thought, in particular, those that perpetuate essentialist and normative positions *vis à vis* the constitution and control of the lesbian body. The critics cited above underestimate the subversive power of Winterson's interrogation of citationality and fail to note the contestatory power of this decidedly queer performance.

The Citational Legacy

One of the most controversial aspects of the novel, and one which has garnered considerable attention, is this fact that the gender of the narrator-protagonist remains undeclared. Winterson's technique here has been criticized as performing a game of 'undecidability' that plays into traditional assumptions about gendered norms (Farwell). However, while it may be play, it is serious play, primarily with the reader's self-conceptualization--a play that, thus, causes the reader to remark and examine his/her own presuppositions about the centrality of gender as identity in any narrative. This is important as these very presuppositions mark the citationality of gender and the assumptions of a normative heterosexual body. In fact, Winterson's ambiguous narrator manages to displace the opposition between hetero and homo, a move that Doty identifies as important to the queer project when he asks us to think about the social construction of an inside/outside opposition, noting that "the articulation of non-heterosexuality bolsters the centrality of heterosexuality itself" (201). Ki Namaste writes: "We cannot assert ourselves to be entirely outside heterosexuality, nor entirely inside, because each of these terms achieves its meaning in relation to the other. What we can do, queer theory suggests, is negotiate these limits". By refusing to assign a specific body and thereby undermining the identification of gender and sexuality, Winterson helps to negotiate these limits by displacing the inside/outside opposition.

In the initial section of the novel, the narrator recounts numerous doomed love affairs, initially affairs with women, thus evoking a rather standard presumptively heterosexual plot: male subject and female object of desire. The narrator also, however, recounts affairs with men, thus suggesting potential bisexuality; then, again, the narrator could be transexual or transgendered. In one particularly parodic scene, the narrator awakes "sweating and chilled" (42) after dreaming of an ex-girlfriend, who kept a fake snake in her letter box, poised at the exact point where, when a visitor reached for the bell, the head of the snake would emerge with a "rat-trap in the jaw" (42), and snap at the genitals of the unsuspecting caller. Initially, the narrator expresses what might be taken as a fear of castration, if the reader is assigning a masculine gender to the narrator, but the snake may also, of course, be read as a threat to "woman" as a snake is a rather standard phallic symbol. Further tantalizing us with gender ambiguity, the girlfriend reassures the narrator--"You've nothing to be frightened of" (42)--suggesting that the narrator's body is secure from loss, but, then again, the ambiguity here could be suggesting that the body is secure from penetration, rather than castration. This scene comes to a climatic, humorous close, when the girlfriend shoves a leek in the snake's mouth: "there was a terrible clatter and the bottom half of the leek fell limply on to the mat" (42). This prompts the abrupt and, we note, terror-stricken awakening of the narrator. The parody in

this scene, provoked by ambiguity, undermines any easy assumptions about the body of the narrator, much less his/her gender and sexuality. What, then, is written on this body?—certainly not an identifiable gender, thus prompting the question: why need the body of narrative be gendered? These circulating, ambiguous and, hence, multiple identity categories in the subject suggest a radical challenge to identity categories such as man, woman, heterosexual and homosexual.

Eventually, we learn of the narrator's present love object, Louise, who is described in decidedly conventional and seductive terms:

Her hair was down, warming her neck and shoulders, falling forward on the table-cloth in wires of light. There was a dangerously electrical quality about Louise. I worried that the steady flame she offered might be fed by a current far more volatile. Superficially she seemed serene, but beneath her control was a cracking power of the kind that makes me nervous when I pass Pylons. She was more of a Victorian heroine than a modern woman. A heroine from a Gothic novel, mistress of her house, yet capable of setting fire to it and fleeing in the night. (49)

This highly conventional imagery, in the final line invoking the infamously 'mad' woman in the attic, Bertha Rochester, not only parodies the traditional reification of the lover in the heterosexual narrative, it also marks Louise as a textual echo, a citation of textual precedents—a Victorian heroine or a Gothic mistress.^{vii} By refusing to identify the gender or sexuality of the narrator, while, at the same time, installing well-worn and, some have argued, sadistic conventions that reify the female as object of desire, Winterson forces a recognition of the normative ideologies embedded in such representations of woman, but she also, at the same time, demonstrates the rigidity of certain identity categories—that is those which link gender and sexuality unproblematically. On the one hand, Winterson's novel evokes this conventional and normative ideology in the relationship between the protagonist and the reified, romanticized representation of the figure of *woman*, Louise, but then problematizes it in the figure of the narrator-protagonist whose citational legacy is not so easily uncovered.

Farwell claims that the ambiguity of the narrator's gender is secondary in this novel to the reconfiguration of the female body in Western romances and the assertion of "sameness rather than heterosexual romantic difference" (191); yet she admits that, had Winterson "resolved the gender of the narrator/lover, her story and its linear narrative tension could have been, as it has been already, called a rather ordinary romantic tale" (187). Farwell is minimizing the fact that many readers spend a substantial amount of time trying to pin down the gender of the narrator. In fact, Patricia Juliana Smith remarks that lesbian readers may easily identify the narrator as lesbian due to a number of *oblique references* to female genitalia in the text (185); however, as the 'castration' scene cited above indicates, Smith's assertion that these genital metaphors are unambiguous, may not be sustained by all readers, lesbian or otherwise. In fact, while this energy to ascertain the gender and sexuality of the narrative protagonist may well be wasted, in that a final identification of the gender of the narrator eludes the reader, the energy, nonetheless, underscores the very obsession that informs our understanding of the body and its narratives. This activity on the part of the reader, provoked by Winterson's technique here, compels the reader's recognition of the citationality of the narrative body and of

his/her own presuppositions. This marks a significant breakdown in the realist effects of mimetic illusionism and suspension of disbelief, as the reader's own constitutive positioning becomes an aspect of the text. In this sense, the boundary between self/other, story/life, and artifice/reality is again transgressed. Susan Bordo would not be the first to remark the indispensable function of the reader, but her remarks are particularly apt here: "subversion does not happen in the text, or to the text. It takes place (or doesn't) in the 'reading' of the text" (168).

In the figure of the protagonist/narrator, Winterson posits a contingent, partial and unnamed identity: the narrator has a function, not a gender, nor a name. This absence also necessarily raises the question of the narrator's sexuality. One should note, however, that the race and the ethnicity of the narrator are also not identified, yet these particular omissions have not raised any questions whatsoever. This presumption of a sexually oriented and gendered identity is, of course, also reflected in the argument, cited above, regarding the identification of what is, or is not, lesbian literature^{viii}. Moreover, the first few paragraphs of the novel underscore the presuppositions of a normative and heterosexual narrative by recollecting a received narrative that ends with the invocation of a highly predictable closure: "they lived happily ever after"(9). It is the clichés, the repetition and the citationality of love that make the trajectory of narrative presuppositions possible and impossible at the same time. The writer/speaker is not finally contained in the "armchair" of love and comfort that narrative leads him/her to expect and, in fact, demand: rather, the narrator is alone on a rock "hewn out of [his/her] own body" (10). The unoriginality of these citational revelries undermines any easy identification of the novel's structure as mimetic realism in its romance mode and, instead, gestures towards the more intertextual and metafictional style typical of highly reflexive fiction.

Those critics, then, who lament the novel's lack of originality seem to miss the fact that unoriginality is the very point. "Why is it," laments Winterson's protagonist, "that the most unoriginal thing we can say to one another is still the thing we long to hear" (9). Moreover, if "'I love you' is always a quotation" (9), then what is not? What Butler calls the "citational legacy" (*Bodies* 225) precedes and conditions subjectivity. Indeed, what plot device could be considered more cliché, specifically in romantic plots, than the sudden revelation of the beloved's incurable illness. Additionally, in this novel, the object of desire is constructed as an *excess* of the feminine, who is pathologized, in a conventional, and, I would argue, parodic repetition of the trajectory of the romantic plot, wherein the beloved is reified to death. In *Art and Lies*, Winterson again addresses the theme of romance and its seductions:

Of course we have romance. Everyone can see how useful romance is. Even the newspapers like romance. They should; they have helped to create it, it is their daily doses of world malaise that poison the heart and mind to such a degree that a strong antidote is required to save what humanness is left in us. (13)

This statement would lead me to believe that Winterson has just as much trouble with the presuppositions of romance, as do the critics who condemn her use of it. Indeed, I tend to agree with Burns, who remarks that "Winterson takes stylistic and imaginative risks" that "offer an alternative use of fantasy and eroticism that both addresses the postmodern

crisis of narrative and offers a new turn in seductive and socially conscious art” (Burns 303). Hence, while this type of recurrent, indeed, banal plot device is expected in other romance genres, such as the soap operas and melodramas that pervade popular culture, it is singularly out of place in the work of a writer with Winterson’s reputation for groundbreaking, political fictions. Clearly, its inclusion is meant to act as an “antidote” by drawing our attention to the structures embedded in the romance drama, particularly those structures which perform the reification and demise of the feminized love object. “It is the power of this citation that gives the performative its binding or conferring power (Butler, *Bodies* 225), not derived from the subject’s autonomous will, but rather from the “‘priority’ of textual authority” (Butler 225). In this case, the love object, Louise, is quite clearly a “citation” of a literary antecedent, interpellated--called into being--as in so many romance plots; however, this time the reiteration of the romance narrative flounders as it forgoes the “temporary totalization performed by identity categories” (Butler 230). Tellingly, the narrator’s signature item of clothing is a pair of bicycle shorts emblazoned with the word, “RECYCLE” (12), in capital letters, just in case we might miss this parodic play. The novel, then, enables us to see the binding power of this citational legacy, by invoking it in the language employed to represent Louise. This legacy becomes all the more apparent as it is set in relief against the ambiguity of the language which interpellates (or fails to interpellate) the narrator, whose only naming is as a disaffected Lothario-- a purportedly gendered naming, however one which is not sustained fully throughout the text.

The Reiteration Compulsion

The theme of citationality is also central to the second section of the novel, which has, deservedly, garnered the most critical attention. In *Bodies that Matter*, Butler reminds us “that reiterations are never simply replicas of the same” (226)—repetition returns a difference. In “The Cells, Tissues Systems and Cavities of the Body,” the narrator in *Written on the Body* cites biomedical discourse in an attempt to reconfigure the medicalized language of the body that constructs loss--disease and death--in order to transform it into fulfilled desire. Winterson employs the language of an ostensible medical text which reads, “For descriptive purposes the human body is separated into cavities. The cranial cavity contains the brain. Its boundaries are formed by the bones of the skull” (119); this passage inspires this richly citational poetic reiteration:

Let me penetrate you. I am the archaeologist of tombs. I would devote my life to marking your passageways, the entrances and exits of the impressive mausoleum, your body.... As I embalm you in my memory, the first thing I shall do is to hookout your brain through your accommodating orifices. Now that I have lost you I cannot allow you to develop, you must be a photograph not a poem. You must be rid of life as I am rid of life.
(119)

This poetic reiteration of the scientific language typical of the medical text performs a breakdown in the “boundaries [which] are formed by the bones of the skull” (119) and the boundaries which ostensibly separate the poetic and the prosaic: each reiteration returns a difference. While the narrative’s poetic utterance repeats the pathologized

language of the diseased body in highly metaphorical terms, in an attempt to transform the impersonality and limitations of scientific description, it too is limited and can only signify because it is citational. “Could a performative succeed,” asks Derrida, “if its formulation did not repeat a ‘coded’ or iterable utterance. . .if it were not identifiable in some way as a ‘citation’?” (quoted in Butler, *Bodies* 226). In fact, this section of the novel is a celebration of the capacity of linguistic art to transform biomedical language “for descriptive purposes,” at the same time as it explicitly recognizes the tyranny of the citation and the limits of discourse, whether biomedical or poetic. Farwell remarks that “the images of bodily union in this section are constructed as poetic transformations of medical facts... Winterson takes a predictable, in this case medical, vocabulary, and refuses its terms. This transformation of both bodies and of the nature of love refuses and yet uses the medical language” (191). It is not clear to me, however, that love and bodies are transformed by this poetic reiteration because although the language certainly reconfigures the medical discourse, the poetic metaphors are not able entirely to escape the biomedical description of the body any more than the scientific discourse can escape poetic and multivalent metaphors: cavities and boundaries. What Farwell’s statement does make clear, however, is that while the poetic utterance wishes to refuse the medicalization of the body--transforming the body through poetry-- by using the language of biomedical discourse, the citational legacy of the body is underscored. “This not owning of one’s words is there from the start, however, since speaking is always in some ways the speaking of a stranger through and as oneself, the melancholic reiteration of a language that one never chose, that one does not find as an instrument to be used, but that one is, as it were, used by” (*Bodies* 242), explains Bulter. However, it is clear that for Winterson the citational legacy does not inscribe immobility, stasis, or death: for the narrator, to contain the body of the beloved in a poem would not suffice, as the poem does not remain stationary, it *develops*, as does the language of narrative (cf. Hillis Miller, p.2-3).

The narrator, thus, borrows (cites) the trope of *development* from photography and applies it, instead, to poetry, thereby underscoring the multiple valences of representation and the possibilities, however limited, available even in repetition. While on the one hand the narrator wants the beloved to be contained by a photograph, rather than a poem, because the poem, in its reiteration, will continue to *develop* and thereby will not stabilize the object of desire, on the other hand, she/he cannot resist the desire to describe and objectify the body of Louise with his/her own narrative. And while the versions of the body inscribed in medical language differ significantly from the versions written in the poetry of desire, or, for that matter, from the narratives of romance, it is language itself that constitutes identities. The narrator wants Louise to remain the same, self-identical, but recognizes that language, while citational, can never return *the same*--to do so would be to *embalm* in memory, to inscribe immobility, stasis, and death (much as the discourse of romance is said to inscribe the death of the autonomous female subject). In fact, according to Belsey, “Desire was probably always citational. . . . What is specific to postmodern writing is that it foregrounds the citationality of desire, affirms it, puts it on display. And in doing so, it both speaks desire and defers it, draws attention to the loquacity [and] the excess of textuality (82). In fact, this contradiction--between the desire to refuse representation, the *development* it entails, and the incapacity to stop

narrating--suggests that the narrator has passed, from a stage of mourning, which would entail a gradual release of the beloved, into a melancholic compulsion to repeat. Similarly, the narrative engages in a compulsive repetition of the tropes of romance, which also returns a difference.

The Repetition Compulsion

This compulsive repetition is constitutive of melancholia; it is an effect of language, of narrative. According to Freud, we “never willingly abandon a libido-position” (126); hence, the process of mourning is a struggle against the recognition of the loss of a beloved, the eventual recognition that the loss is permanent and the subsequent detaching of the libido from the lost object. Freud points out that mourning occurs as a reaction to the loss of a loved one, but also as a response to the loss of abstractions and ideals, which have taken the place, metonymically, of the loved one (125). He further conjectures:

Reality passes its verdict--that the object no longer exists--upon each single one of the memories and hopes through which the libido was attached to the lost object, and the ego, confronted as it were with the decision whether it will share this fate, is persuaded by the sum of its narcissistic satisfaction in being alive to sever its attachment to the non-existent object. (137)

Melancholia is similar to mourning in that it is a response to loss; however, it is distinguished by the inability to sever this attachment and a subsequent internalization of the lost other: “melancholia is in some way related to an unconscious loss of a love-object, in contradistinction to mourning, in which there is nothing unconscious about the loss” (127). In Butler’s reading of Freud’s essay, she notes that

Melancholia refuses to acknowledge loss, and in this sense ‘preserves’ its lost objects as psychic effects....[T]he melancholic seeks not only to reverse time, reinstating the imaginary past as the present, but to occupy every position and thereby to preclude the loss of the addressee. The melancholic would have *said something*, if he or she could, but did not, and now believes in the sustaining power of the voice. (*Psychic* 183)

Melancholia, then, is an act of preservation through repetition. In Winterson’s novel, the narrator initially abandons the beloved, in the belief that Louise’s husband, the oncologist, can do more for her; tellingly, the narrator does not speak directly to Louise, but leaves her a note announcing his/her departure. However, as the plot progresses, the narrator cannot release Louise and returns to London to search for her; when she cannot be found, the narrator turns to “the sustaining power of the voice,” to the reiteration of the story of Louise, to an act of narration that inscribes melancholia. Winterson writes, “Love demands expression. It will not stay still, stay silent, be good, be modest, be seen and not heard, no” (9). Even the narrator’s expression entails the grammatical and syntactic repetition of the verb, the copula, the negation. The narrator finally refuses to abandon the beloved and, hence, he/she puts the body of the beloved into expression. Similarly, the novel itself refuses to release all the unconscious others--the excess of desire--the larger loss of an imaginary wholeness. In performing the symptoms of melancholia, the novel engages in a citational reiteration that attempts to perform an act of restoration through “the sustaining power of the voice”--that is, through the attempt to call into being

the lost other. This melancholic narration of loss is constitutive of self, according to Butler:

Survival is a matter of avowing the trace of loss that inaugurates one's own emergence. To make of melancholia a simple "refusal" to grieve its losses conjures a subject who might already be something without its losses, that is, one who voluntarily extends and retracts his or her will. Yet the subject who might grieve is implicated in a loss of autonomy that is mandated by linguistic and social life; it can never produce itself autonomously. From the start, this ego is other than itself; what melancholia shows is that only by absorbing the other as oneself does one become something at all. (*Psychic 195*)

If melancholia and its voicing are constitutive of the self, then, narrative is the enactment of melancholia. However, while the narrator attempts to revive the lost object of desire, Louise, the narrative itself attempts to revive something other.

Louise, we note, is celebrated precisely as excess throughout the novel in the symbol of the capitalized 'L'. As Farwell notes, "the 'L' which begins as part of the lover's early infatuation with Louise...finally...is written on the narrator's body as an internal tattoo...It does not take much intuitive grasp of literature to imagine that this 'L' is also written as Lesbian" (193). However, other possible meanings circulate around this prolific 'L'. One obvious citational echo, reverberating out of the literary history of romance, is the resonance occasioned by Petrarch's odes to Laura. However, for my purposes here, much of the real mourning that takes place in the novel is not for the loss of the Petrarchan love object, Laura or Louise, nor for the loss of love, but rather for the loss of a non-citational, original literature; the loss of a referential language; in fact, as repetition makes clear--love, language, literature, Louise--the "L" marks *Loss* itself. In fact, this theme is announced in the very first sentence of the novel: "Why is the measure of love loss?" This irrecoverable loss is figured most prominently in the 'death' of Louise, but also in the failure of language to materialize the body of the beloved: for instance, the failure of the poetic reconfiguration of biomedical discourse on the body, in the second and most celebrated section of the novel, to materialize that lost body marks the limits of both *poesis* and scientific facticity. Also, there is the failure of the text itself to reclaim the loss and hence the need to repeat the story over and over again. Louise is a fiction, a product of narrative and of mourning, and she cannot be recovered in any material sense, just as, within the context of the novel itself, she cannot recover from her leukaemia. This inevitably leaves us with the question posed by the novel's enigmatic closure: does Louise return to the arms of her lover as anything other than a melancholic reiteration of desire; or is her appearance a restaging of the very language of desire employed to reconstruct her, both in the reconfiguration of the medicalized narrative of the body, and, indeed, in the ostensible autobiography that would wish to reconstruct her in the first place? Autobiography, Brooks reminds us, is always an act of repetition. Thus, for the textualized author/narrator, Louise becomes, "like a character in a book" (193) that he/she is trying to recover (in many senses of the word); however, another character informs the narrator that Louise "wasn't yours for the making" (189). These ambiguities leave the reader with a fully realized sense of the mourning for an object that cannot be

fully recovered by language. In fact, the ‘L’ here, for some readers, may evoke yet another name: Lacan.

Lacanian psychoanalysis, in fact, provides us with considerable insight into the nature of this loss and its relationship to language. Despite Dean’s disagreement with Butler’s theory of the performative and, more pointedly, her (mis)reading of Lacan, I believe Dean helps us better understand both Butler and Lacan, by pointing out the following:

it is because Lacan’s conception of sexual difference explains it in terms of neither nature nor culture that psychoanalysis offers ways of conceptualizing gender and sexuality that remain irreducible to the now-sterile essentialism-constructionism debate...[L]ibido or desire finds gender fundamentally irrelevant...but I would like to emphasize at this point that the obliviousness of the unconscious to sexual difference should not be taken as justification for completely disregarding sexual difference.

We live in a social world where there is more than one sex. (87)

I would like to add, for clarity’s sake, that we live in a world constituted by narratives within which gender, among other things, has been constituted and reinforced in citational terms. Dean expands on the concept of loss as the fundamental condition of subjectification and desire in Lacan, and he explains desire as the effect of *the limits* of language, that is, the limits of the symbolic.^{ix} According to Lacan, the object^x of unconscious fantasy, “escapes the imaginary and the domain of the ego” (Dean 34): it is that which escapes signification in the symbolic--the remainder--“that keeps desire in motion” (Dean 31); it is this unconscious object, then, which motivates the signifying body to keep narrative motion. Louise, and all she represents metaphorically and metonymically, is the incitement for narrative, for language predicated on the desire to replace loss. “The objects of desire that we in fact picture to ourselves, are not those of the unconscious, but are always substitutes for what cannot be figured in language, in the symbolic (Dean 58). The occasion of this narrative is, after all, the loss of Louise. However, this narrative figures, on a grander scale, the way in which all language attempts to negotiate, over and over again, the loss of the radical Other--the Real in Lacanian terms-- “because it is only in the imaginary that the Other can be an other—that is an image of another person” (34); it is this loss, then, which constitutes desire. Catherine Belsey assists our understanding of desire. Desire,” she writes,

is the location of the contradictory imperative that motivates the signifying body which is a human being in love. Desire is in excess of the organism; conversely, it is what remains unspoken in the utterance. In consequence its objects are no more than a succession of substitutes for an imagined originary presence, a half-remembered ‘oceanic’ pleasure in the lost real, a completeness which is desire’s final, unattainable object. (5)

The novel’s central theme, then, cannot be reduced to over-simplified themes of seduction and loss, the thematics typical of the romance genre. The end of the novel directs us back to the beginning, as the end is “where the story starts” (190). Thus, we are sent back to the opening sentence of the novel, which directly confronts us with the question: “Why is the measure of love loss?” The next few paragraphs, however, locate and contest both loss and love as constituted in and effects of language. Citing

Shakespeare, the narrator, the ostensible writer of this autobiographical and, hence, retrospective narrative, quotes Caliban:

You taught me language and my profit on't is
I know how to curse. The red plague rid you
For learning me your language. (9)

This curse, addressed to Prospero in *The Tempest*, is here addressed to us. The curse is a performative meant precisely to enact what it utters. The curse remarks the failure of language to replace the lost other produced by entry into the symbolic. Language is, in fact, the evidence of our loss (and thus constitutes our unconscious desire). Caliban's curse reproduces or repeats this tragic loss--the loss of an imaginary wholeness--which never existed in the first place, except metonymically, in language, just as the novel repeats the attempt to reconfigure the lost object through language. The end of the novel directs us back to the beginning in a recursive move that reminds us that the need to repeat marks the function of language predicated on its failure to replace the lost other. The curse, then, is the symbol of language as performance and, at the same time, the iteration of the limits of that performance--the curse, in short, provides a *mise en abyme* for the novel as a whole, in that it, too, curses the incapacity of language to materialize that body which does not exist materially, nor in the symbolic.

Conclusion: Silence is Death

For these reasons, I believe the reduction of Winterson's novel to a simple romance narrative, a particularly unoriginal one at that, does not do justice to the complexity of this narrative performance:

Postmodern writing knows that metaphysics is not an option; it takes for granted that the process of representation can never be the reconstitution of presence...it variously celebrates or struggles with the opacity of the signifier. Postmodern fiction precisely refuses to be silent in the face of what cannot be said...The subject is what speaks, writes, reads, signifies, and it is no more than that. Silence is death. Desire lives, then, in its inscription. (Belsey 77)

Importantly, that which the narrator seeks to name with writing is desire itself. As Dean explains, "[t]he ill fit between language and the body introduces wrinkles and gaps that generate desire. We might say that the unconscious and desire exist only as a consequence of this disharmony between the structures of language and those of the body" (59). Moreover, the field of writing, Winterson tells us in the final words of the novel, is not closed, despite its citational legacy; rather it is bountiful and open-ended as it returns both repetitions and differences:

This is where the story starts...I stretch out my hand and reach the corners of the world. The world is bundled up in this room. Beyond the door, where the river is, where the roads are, we shall be. We can take the world with us when we go and sling the sun under your arm. Hurry now, it's getting late. I don't know if this is a happy ending but here we are let loose in open fields. (190)

With these words the narrator and the reader are returned to the commencement of the novel to begin, once more, with the omnipresence of the citation, to reiterate loss again and again. Farwell is not wrong in attributing much of the imagery in this novel to John

Donne's metaphysical conceits. Again, in this closing passage, Winterson repeats an earlier authority on loss and thus underscores, not just the limits, but the possibilities inherent in repetition. Winterson, too, recreates a microcosm, the room which is made "an everywhere" by love (Donne); moreover, she inscribes a "Petrarchan . . . fragmentation" (Farwell 190) of the lover's body and, most importantly, reiterates the conventions of the romance novel in an attempt to *recover* desire. But the recovery is forever postponed and loss is constantly mourned. Closure does not guarantee Louise's return, except as figuration in a melancholic narrative that refuses to release its object of desire. We are, I think, misreading these final words if we suppose that suddenly open fields suggests a liberation from the melancholia occasioned by repetition. The open fields, into which we are let loose, after all, are predicated on either a return to the beginning, "where the story starts,"--in effect, a repetition--or else remain, as indicated by the blank space following on, deathly silent--reminding us that "the end of all stories, even if the writer forebears to mention it, is death, which is where our time stops short" (Carter 2). The alternative to death is repetition, with a vengeance: the melancholic narrative.

The highly codified expectations of the romance genre, the discursive limits of interpellations of gender and sexuality, as well as, the role of our citational legacy in the formation of subjectivity, engage Winterson in *Written on the Body*. By means of a highly theatrical, some might say, hyperbolic performance that relies heavily on a deliberately excessive use of citation for its effect, Winterson's novel renders visible the role of language and narrative in subject formation and thus implicates the reader by demanding our acknowledgement of our own citational selves. This performance undermines the seductions of romance narrative; to use Butler's words, the novel "*mimes and renders hyperbolic* the discursive convention that it also *reverses*" (*Psychic* 232). That is, while her narrative cannot fail but to re-inscribe the authority of citation, it also enacts a breakdown of this authority through a melancholic narrative of excess, which returns a repetition with a difference. And breakdown, Donna Haraway reminds us, should not be pathologized: "[b]reakdown is a word for those moments when denaturalization occurs, when what is taken for granted can no longer be taken for granted precisely because there is a glitch in the system...[b]reakdown provokes a space of possibility precisely because things don't work smoothly anymore" (Haraway, *How Like a Leaf* 115). Winterson's novel provides such a moment of breakdown, by revealing that the real melancholia in this narrative is not the romantic compulsion to mourn Louise, but the melancholia occasioned by our desire to narrate something other--something other than 'the same story every time'.

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NOTES

ⁱ Winterson, citing Caliban from Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, on the opening page of *Written on the Body*.

ⁱⁱ Winterson, *Art and Lies*, 154.

ⁱⁱⁱ This 'loss' is actually predicated on the discovery of the discursive nature of reality, which might well produce a sense of loss and mourning for the illusion of a transcendent reality.

^{iv} See Teresa de Lauretis' *Alice Doesn't* and Laura Mulvey's *Visual Pleasures* for discussions of narrative sadism.

^v Winterson writes, "The world is bundled up in this room. . . . We can take the world with us when we go and sling the sun under your arm" (190). Indeed, the narrator protagonist makes love "an everywhere," by narrativizing it; by reconfiguring that narrative as a failure to materialize love, narrating becomes an act of melancholia.

^{vi} *Written on the Body* is written in first person point of view and is ostensibly a memoir of seduction and loss. The narrator/protagonist, who is nameless, is also, then, the textualized author.

^{vii} Winterson's text employs other intertexts as well. It reflexively cites Monique Wittig's *The Lesbian Body*, in which Wittig writes that "lesbians are not women." Wittig,

herself, is citing a Irigary's proposition that "woman" does not exist: she is "this sex which is not one." Both of these texts, along with Winterson's own, problematize identity categories such as man, woman, lesbian.

^{viii}For a detailed and informative discussion of the issues at stake in this debate see Marilyn Farwell's "When is a Lesbian Narrative a Lesbian Narrative?" in *Heterosexual Plots and Lesbian Narratives*. New York: New York University Press, 1996.

^{ix}Dean engages the debate between the social constructivist account of the formation of subjectivity and the psychoanalytic account, in order to argue the urgency and efficacy of a renewed interest in the explanatory power of psychoanalysis in our understanding of subjectivity, particularly in light of the AIDS epidemic. His particular interest is to recuperate psychoanalytic conceptions of the subject for the purposes of a Queer theorizing of sexuality.

^x Object a (*objet petit a*)